**God the Father and the Death of Jesus:**

**Roots of Childrearing Violence in Christian Theology**

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Today, I am going beyond an earlier version of my paper presented to the IPA in June 2016 entitled, “Unfinished Business: From Punitive to Humane Parenting in the Bible and Contemporary Christianity.” This paper re-examines the role of religious texts in the legitimation of punitive parenting. Such texts predate Christianity, and go back to the Hebrew Bible, most notably passages from the book of Proverbs. They extend to pedagogical materials in use today. I once hypothesized that most Christians today practice a less abusive and more evolved style of parenting than some like Dr. McMahon, a fundamentalist Reformed theologian, whose writings I examined earlier. As an example, I discussed the writings of parenting guru James Dobson, who moderates the severity of Biblical child rearing norms by introducing concepts from modern psychology, though still advocating corporal punishment of children. Finally, I examined the writings of pastoral psychologist Donald Capps of Princeton Seminary who defines the humane end of the punitive-humane continuum in Christian theology and child-rearing practice. However, I now know that there are other popular writers closer to the fundamentalist end of the spectrum. Therefore, a sizeable percentage of Christians today fall at the right-wing end of the fundamentalist/humanist continuum.

Why does punitive parenting with corporal punishment occupy such a central role within today’s Christian families and churches? After my review of the evidence, I am going to suggest that the reason for its unbreakable hold is more than because of a few Bible verses in the Book of Proverbs. Rather, I suggest that the real reason is found at the center of Christian theology, to the Father and Son relationship in the Trinity.

But first to my review of the prevalence of Christian corporal punishment:

**Christian Fundamentalist theologian Dr. C. Matthew McMahon** has written a guide to parenting entitled, “A sober look at what Christian parents need to do in disciplining their children: How to Not Foul Up the Discipline of Your Children and Save their Souls from Hell.” McMahon is an American Calvinist Reformed theologian and adjunct professor at Whitefield Theological Seminary. He is the founder of “A Puritan’s Mind,” a website of Calvinist theological materials.

As a fundamentalist Reformed Presbyterian, McMahon is a Biblical literalist. “The premise of this paper is quite simple,” he writes. “It is a short look mainly at the book of Proverbs in raising children and discipline.” McMahon then outlines three presuppositions: “First, the Bible is God’s Word and His authority reigns supreme in every area of the Christian life, including how to discipline your children….” (p. 2). “Second, the book of Proverbs is the book of ‘common sense.’… within the Bible’s Wisdom Literature… [It] is filled with information about raising children, and discipline.”… “Third, this is a paper for Christian parents who need a boost, a kick in the pants, to raise their children according to the Bible.” (p. 2) [McMahon’s language is so striking that what follows is my digest of his ideas using his own words.]

What Do We Do about Covenant Children (the children of Godly Christian families)?

“Covenant Children are not free from sin. … Of all children, covenant children should be disciplined most.” “The Fall has rendered children, the moment they come out of the womb, to sin. They are prone to it in every form.”

When Does God Expect Obedience to Take Place?

“The rod, spanking, or corporal discipline, is the God-ordained means to correct children of every age. Children are naturally wayward, and the rod brings them back…. There is no age limit here. However, parents should not be so foolish to think that they should spank their 6-month-old as they would a 5-year-old. Yet, they should also not be foolish to think that their 6-month-old does not need corporal correction.” (p. 6)

McMahon then cites Proverbs 19:18, “’Chasten your son while there is hope and do not set your heart on his destruction.’ … God says that there is a time in your child’s life where there will be no more hope in correcting them….(p. 6) He also references Proverbs 23:13, ‘Do not withhold correction from a child, For if you beat him with a rod, he will not die.’ … God says that spanking your two year old in a proper manner will not kill him. . . . The Bible says nothing of giving your child a ‘timeout.’ . . . Will you listen to the New Age gurus and Dr. Spock, or will you listen to God?” (p. 7)

“Parents need to understand the word, ‘beat.’ It is the Hebrew verb *nakah* (naw-kaw) which in Proverbs 23:13 literally reads, ‘to smite, strike, beat, scourge, clap, applaud, give a thrust.’ In other words, scourge or strike the child so that he never does what he did ever again…. This is not brutality. Rather, it means that [the child’s] bottom is so red, that they have a hard time sitting back down when you are done. If the child is too young for that, then give them a good smack with a tense rubber band on their arm or their thigh. They will remember it!” (p. 7)

Secondly, why should you do this? McMahon quotes the rest of Proverbs 23:13-14: “’Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with a rod and deliver his soul from hell.’ God says that you will beat your child with the rod and deliver his soul from hell …

McMahon concludes: “If you do not keep in step with God’s prescription for your children, (1) you will be judged for neglecting God’s commands and principles in His Word, and (2) you will have unruly children that bring you shame.”

McMahon recommends several parenting books, one of which is a best seller by Tedd Tripp, entitled *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*.

In 2016, I had relegated McMahan to the extremes of the Christian spectrum of child raising practices. Imagine my surprise then to discover the republication of Bishop R.C. Ryle’s book, *The Duties of Parents: Parenting your Children God’s Way* originally published in 1888, again in 1993 and yet again in 2014. As the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, a member of the Evangelical movement that rejected Biblical higher criticism and an Oxford University graduate, Ryle was squarely in the 19th century Christian mainstream—he died in 1900 just as the 20th century opened. Yet the website, Christianbook.com, promotes Ryle’s parenting book, stating that it “will help any family reassess their goals according to Scripture.”

Ryle places himself squarely in the “spare the rod, spoil the child” school of thought. He writes, “*Spoiling* [italics his] is a very expressive word and sadly full of meaning. The shortest way to spoil children is to let them have their own way and allow them to do wrong and not be punished for it. Believe me, you must not spoil them. Whatever pain it may cost you to correct them is worth it unless you wish to ruin your children’s souls.” (p. 32)

Like McMahon, Ryle cites the book of Proverbs, 19:18, 23:13-14. In addition, he cites Proverbs 22:15, to show that children will naturally do wrong and the ‘rod of discipline’ is the solution: “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him.” He also cites Proverbs 29:15,17 to underscore McMahon’s point that the rod is necessary to family cohesion and respect: “The rod and reproof bring wisdom, but a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother. Correct your son, and he will give you comfort; he will also delight your soul.”

Another contemporary voice on the Christian right is Paul David Tripp. Apparently sensing pushback, Tripp lays out three points on why corporal punishment is appropriate: “Spanking is appropriate because it teaches a child to connect foolishness with pain. Spanking is appropriate when there is a clear act of disobedience to authority; spanking is appropriate when it is not administered in anger or in public.” (Paul David Tripp, Getting to the Heart of Parenting: Leader’s Guide, p. 5)

**Now for James Dobson:** Dobson was raised as an Evangelical in the Church of the Nazarene and earned a doctorate in psychology at the University of Southern California. As a psychologist, Dobson came to realize the inadequacy of traditional Biblical child rearing norms and their potential for legitimizing severe child abuse, so he tempered these norms. Most notably, he advises parents to exhaust non-physical approaches to discipline before resorting to corporal punishment.

As an Evangelical Christian, Dobson adheres to Biblical literalism. Caught in the contradiction between modern psychology’s norms of child rearing and the Bible’s, Dobson resolves this contradiction in favor of corporal punishment, but ends up with a synthesis that is less severe than the purely Bible-based teachings of McMahon, Ryle or Tripp.

In his classic best-selling books *Dare to Discipline and The Strong-Willed Child*, Dobson advocates the spanking of children from the age of eighteen months up to 10 years old when they misbehave but warns that "corporal punishment should be a rather infrequent occurrence. I do not believe in harsh, oppressive, demeaning discipline… parenthood does not give the right to slap and intimidate a child because Dad had a bad day or Mom is in a lousy mood.” (*Dare to Discipline*, p. 20, 51; *The New Strong-Willed Child*, p. 142-143) He warns against "harsh spanking" because "it is not necessary to beat the child into submission... On the other hand, the spanking should not be too gentle. If it doesn’t hurt, it fails to be a deterrent for the bad behavior in the future. The spanking should be strong enough to cause the child to really cry.” (*The New Strong-Willed Child*, pp. 160-161)

Unlike Biblical traditionalists, Dobson does not rule out lesser forms of punishment, such as being deprived of a privilege, being sent to their room for a time out or being made to do a chore instead of playing. He advocates a hierarchy of punishments with spanking being near the top to be utilized after lesser punishments have failed. Further, while a switch or hairbrush may be used, the spanking should be confined to the buttocks area where permanent damage is not likely to happen. (*The New Strong-Willed Child*, pp. 157-9)

Dobson has called disciplining children to be a necessary but unpleasant part of raising children that should only be carried out by informed and mature parents. Anyone identified as a child abuser, who has an anger management problem or takes delight in another’s pain should not engage in corporal punishment. (*The New Strong-Willed Child*, p. 157)

Like other Biblical literalists, Dobson emphasizes the fallen nature of children and the need for parents to be strong authority figures. The worst transgression of the child, in Dobson’s mind is open defiance of parental authority. *Childish defiance is grounds for nothing less than corporal punishment*.” (*The New Strong-Willed Child*, p. 20)

Much as Dobson attempts to harmonize religious teaching with modern psychology, critics such as John Bartkowski and Christopher Ellison maintain that Dobson's views veer sharply from mainstream child psychologists and are nothing more than expressions of his traditional religious views. While this criticism is valid as far as it goes, Dobson does not represent the extreme abusive pole in the abusive-humane continuum in Christian child rearing. That distinction belongs to Matthew McMahon, Bishop Ryle, the Tritts, highly abusive fundamentalists and Evangelicals who advocate the use of corporal punishment as a first, not a last, resort. McMahon and Dobson operate from the same theological paradigm based on Biblical literalism, but many Evangelicals advocate harsh Biblical child-rearing norms in their pure form, while Dobson moderates them by combining them with non-Biblical ideas and practices drawn from modern psychology.

**Like Dobson’s secular critics, Professor Donald Capps**, who taught pastoral theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, condemned Dobson’s child rearing doctrines as contributing to child abuse. In addition, he critiqued the religious and theological foundations of Dobson’s doctrines—his reading of the Bible—which Dobson shares with McMahon. Capps’ book, *The Child’s Song: The Religious Abuse of Children*, was written to explain “the ways in which religious practice and theological ideas have sanctioned the abuse and torment of children.” (*The Child’s Song*, p. 156.) Capps’ analysis is fully aligned with the ideas of Alice Miller, Lloyd DeMause, and other psychohistorians and psychologists who are highly critical of all forms of physical and emotional punishment of children.

Capps offered a Biblically informed but thoroughly humane theological paradigm for parenting and child discipline. He did not consider the story of the Fall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden to be the last word concerning the heart of a child. Nor did he focus on the Book of Proverbs, but rather on the teachings and actions of Jesus concerning children as found in the Gospel writings.

Rather than viewing the child as morally inferior and in need of molding, Jesus elevated the child as embodying the Kingdom of God. Placing a child in the midst of his disciples, Jesus said, “’Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.’ (Matt. 18:2-3) Capps understood the Kingdom of Heaven to be a return to the Garden of Eden, the archetypal garden, also referred to in the Book of Revelation. It signifies that place where the human psyche and soul find wholeness.

Capps explained: “The original Garden of Eden story undermines this belief [in humanity being given a second chance], and, in so doing, leaves us feeling demoralized, as though we have been condemned to live in a world in which all of us must get perfect marks and any mistake or failure means that we are condemned for life. The author of Revelation envisions the children of the world returning to the archetypal garden, gathering beside the river where stands the Tree of Life, with its 12 kinds of fruit and its healing leaves (Rev. 22:2). (*The Child’s Song*, p. 170-1)

What Donald Capps fails to confront, and what McMahon and Dobson fail to acknowledge in their conflicting views of child rearing is the 800 lb. gorilla in the room: the Christian narrative of the Heavenly Father arranging for the death of his own divine, sinless Son to bring salvation to the world. Christians have for centuries taught that Jesus had to go to the cross to bring about the world’s salvation, whether it be to save his Father’s honor, to satisfy God’s law, or as a substitute for humanity’s sinfulness. What traditional Christians have believed for centuries is nothing less than a return to human sacrifice. In the story of Genesis 22, we saw Israel’s religion rejecting child sacrifice, when Abraham was provided a lamb to substitute for his son Isaac. In the narrative of Jesus’s death on the cross, most Christian churches have restored this grisly narrative. For the Eucharist, Christians drink the blood and eat the body of Jesus. Is it any wonder then, that corporal punishment plays such a central role in the raising of children?

Indeed, Bishop R. C. Ryle comes the closest to referencing God sending his Son to die, and compares the use of the rod on a child with how “God chastens His people with trial and affliction. He sends them crosses and disappointments” [*just as God sent his own Son to die on a cross!]; Ryle goes on*,] God “lays them low with sickness; He strips them of property and friends . . . (p. 37) To have our wills checked and denied is a blessed thing for us; it makes us value enjoyments when they come.” Ryle ends by imploring his reader: “Don’t be wiser than God; train your children as He trains His.” (p. 39)

Mennonite theologian, J. Denny Weaver, who critiques the mainstream Christian teaching that God sent his Son to die, begins his book, *God without Violence*, with a young son’s question to his mother. After Sunday School the son came home with questions about what God is allowed to do and what parents are allowed to do. After several rounds of queries, his real concern surfaced when he asked, ‘A parent would never put their child to death on the cross, right?’ Many people will have little difficulty realizing that the question reflects the inherited understanding that ‘God sent Jesus to die on the cross for our sins.’ … And if God did this to God’s Son, the boy wondered, would human parents perhaps do it to their son?” (p. 1) Weaver’s argues that instead, the Christian God is a nonviolent God, and that it is Jesus’s earthly teaching that is redemptive. Jesus didn’t have to die! Only 100 years after Jesus’s death did church fathers turn Jesus into a sacrificial lamb.

Why does punitive parenting with corporal punishment occupy such a central role within today’s Christian families and churches? It’s not because of a few Bible verses in the Book of Proverbs. The central reason is found at the center of Christian theology, that the Son, Jesus had to die for humanity’s sins to satisfy his Father. The Father God becomes the perfect model of the abusive, even murderous parent, while the divine Son becomes the model of submission to the Father’s abuse.

And lest one may think that theology is relegated to a few church teachers, consider how most church services celebrate the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist every week or month by partaking of bread and wine as Christ the Son’s body and blood.

No wonder the little boy asked his mother, “If God did this to God’s Son would human parents do it to their son?”